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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000899

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS: NEGOTIATIONS TO BEGIN

REF: TBILISI 0894

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: Protests continued through the weekend, but with no major incidents. The one month anniversary of the start of the protests on Saturday, May 9 drew what might have been as many as 15,000 protesters on a beautiful sunny day. On Friday, May 8, Speaker Bakradze met with a group of deputy leaders from the non-parliamentary opposition after Irakli Alasania backed out of a previously agreed upon meeting. According to Bakradze, the non-parliamentary group only wanted to discuss technical details about meeting with Saakashvili or Saakashvili's resignation, offering nothing of substance. In the early hours of Sunday morning, President Saakashvili agreed to meet both the non-parliamentary and parliamentary opposition on Monday afternoon at 2 pm and 4:30pm local time, respectively. We asked the Ministry of Internal Affairs to comment on observations made by the EU Ambassador that the three young opposition activists were beaten while being detained in connection with the beating of a Georgia Public Broadcaster journalist. According to the MOIA, the activists were battered and bruised when they arrived at the police station. End Summary.

12. (C) Comment: The non-parliamentary opposition's decision to send its second string to the meeting with Bakradze was clearly meant to be a slight rather than a good-faith beginning to negotiations. Bakradze was disappointed, particularly in Alasania with whom Bakradze thought he had a good faith deal to begin negotiations. Despite the obvious public slight, Bakradze held the meeting. Regarding Saakashvili's decision to meet with the opposition, some leaders are claiming success, and touting their strength. However, from our vantage point, the non-parliamentary opposition seems as divided and confused than ever. Some leaders appear to want a negotiated way out, while others seem unwilling to compromise. A positive sign is that Levan Gachechiladze -- who is publicly viewed as a key leader -- has been quietly talking to GoG interlocutors about bringing the protests to an end. Our GoG contacts seem calm and determined to let this play out, confident that with every day in the street the non-parliamentary opposition loses credibility and its internal fissures become more exacerbated. Despite the talks, the non-parliamentary radicals vow to continue the protests. The planned meetings represent a significant step forward and we will continue to push all sides to negotiate in good faith. End Comment.

Protests Still Modest - Bakradze Meeting Not Productive

13. (C) Only Saturday, May 9 drew a significant crowd of approximately 15,000 on the one month anniversary of the beginning of protests (which was also Victory in Europe Day). Speeches ranged from defiant to the conciliatory. No new initiatives or policies were discussed with speeches largely focused on Saakashvili. Despite what Speaker David Bakradze thought was Irakli Alasania's word to meet without preconditions, Alasania backed out at the last minute,

leaving a team of lesser known individuals to meet the Speaker. (Embassy Note: Having spoken with both individuals, our understanding was that Alasania had agreed to meet Bakradze alone if he could not convince others in the non-parliamentary opposition to compromise. End Note.) The team included Gubaz Sanikidze (National Forum), Tina Khidasheli (Republicans and wife of David Usupashvili), QKhidasheli (Republicans and wife of David Usupashvili), Viktor Dolidze (Alasania's team and former Ambassador to OSCE), and Koka Guntsadze (Independent). Sanikidze had early stated that "those who do not participate in the protest actions are stinking corpses" and announced the non-parliamentary opposition had a retribution list and would "devastate" the families of police officers loyal to the GoG when they came to power. Despite having a reputation as a moderate, Bakradze told the Ambassador that Dolidze was the most aggressive of the four.

14. (C) Bakradze outlined the offers and areas in which the GoG was willing to negotiate. Bakradze told the Ambassador that the non-parliamentary group was not authorized to speak about anything of substance, and apparently told Bakradze the only thing they would discuss was the logistics regarding a meeting with Saakashvili. Bakradze told the Ambassador that he had spoken with Alasania and informed him that the GoG would negotiate with the larger non-parliamentary opposition instead of him personally. (Embassy Comment: Alasania had numerous chances to break out and play the major role in negotiating with the GoG. By choosing to remain part of the larger non-parliamentary group, Alasania, whose professed goal was to initiate serious democratic changes, increasingly appears to be just another voice in a group that is mainly focused on demanding Saakashvili's resignation and has yet to

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put forward any coherent vision for positive democratic change. End Comment.)

Misha Agrees to Meet

15. (C) Late May 10, Saakashvili's office announced that the President would meet with the non-parliamentary and parliamentary opposition in separate meetings at the new MoIA building. The non-parliamentary opposition was scheduled to meet at 2 pm local time and the parliamentary opposition at 4:30 pm local time. Non-parliamentary leaders scheduled to attend include Alasania, Gachechiladze, Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way), and Kakha Shartava (National Forum). Immediately, several non-parliamentary leaders expressed their unwillingness to discuss anything but Saakashvili's resignation in the meetings. Nino Burjanadze made a terse statement saying that no compromise was acceptable and only Saakashvili's resignation would be discussed. Tina Khidasheli said that she wanted to be "maximally optimistic" that Saakashvili would see the light and resign. She returned to hard-line statements that only regime change was acceptable. Other leaders issued similar statements, leaving no room for compromise. In fact, Bakradze told the Ambassador that Burjanadze was working behind the scenes at every turn to undercut those who would compromise. For his part, Saakashvili issued a statement reaffirming his readiness to meet with any political force and expressed hope their joint efforts could overcome existing problems.

GoG Appears Calm, Philosophical

16. (C) Speaker Bakradze met with a visiting Codel on May 8 and explained that the legacy of the Rose revolution gives some legitimacy to the idea of fighting political battles in the streets rather than Parliament, but drew a distinction between Georgia under Shevardnadze and the current political situation in Georgia. Bakradze said the GoG's goal was to de-legitimize the idea that holding constant street protests and delivering ultimatums was an effective way to engage in politics. Bakradze said the GoG's goal was to break the cycle rather than come to some sort of temporary truce that

would only kick the problem down the road. He was also frank about November 7, 2007, saying the GoG needed to exercise extreme patience in light of its past mistakes.

17. (C) Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Akaki Minashvili (UNM) told Poloff that the GoG would continue to be patient. Minashvili expressed his view that the protests were waning, and the general public was tired of it. Minashvili thought that everyday the non-parliamentary opposition continued to protest, it decreased in stature and became more divided. Minashvili said the non-parliamentary opposition was trapped by raising the expectation that they could force Saakashvili to resign but now were well aware that they could not deliver on that promise. According to Minashvili, the GoG expected the process to play out like it had thus far, and called it an essential step that Georgia needed to pass to normalize and consolidate democracy.

18. (C) EU Ambassador to Georgia Per Eklund told the Ambassador that he met with the three young opposition activists who had been detained in connection with the beating of a Georgia Public Broadcaster journalist and who were the cause of the May 6 opposition attack on a police station. According to Eklund, all three activists showed bruises that Eklund believed were a result of mistreatment during detention. We have asked senior levels at the Ministry of Internal Affairs for a reaction to Ambassador QMinistry of Internal Affairs for a reaction to Ambassador Eklund's observations. MOIA Spokesman Utiashvili told us that the activists appeared battered and bruised when they arrived at the police station. He said that the bruises came from their scuffle with the journalist and their attack on two police cars before they were arrested (windows were broken). According to Utiashvili, force was also required to apprehend the three. In his view, the force used was "appropriate" and he maintained that no force was required or exerted upon them after their arrival at the police station.
TEFFT